

CH-370
Laurel Branch (Olive Hill)
Bensville Road (MD 228)
Bensville

c. 1770; c. 1840

The oldest portion of Laurel Branch represents an architectural form popular in this region from the second half of the 18th century to about 1820. Functional and easily enlarged as its owner prospered, it was a house type especially favored by those of modest economic means.

Dating from about 1770, Laurel Branch is one of the oldest known examples of this particular plan. Among other distinctive features, it is considerably smaller than other similar houses.

The house was extensively altered and enlarged by a series of renovations carried out in the 1800s and early in this century. Nevertheless, a considerable amount of its original framing and finishes remained preserved. Other details of its early appearance were revealed through months of careful study and documentation.

The house was built without a foundation, and its sills and floor joists were laid directly on the ground. Although it had walls of heavy, timber-framed construction, the roof was fashioned out of unusually diminutive framing members that depended on an external sheathing of vertically patterned, side-lapped clapboards for strength and rigidity. The outside walls were also covered with riven clapboard and an exterior chimney flanked by small sheds stood at one end.

Deeper than wide in its overall dimensions, the house contained two back-to-back first-floor rooms with cater-cornered fireplaces and exposed ceiling joists. A narrow, enclosed stair in a corner of the front room provided access to two unheated and dimly lighted attic chambers. While the two first-floor rooms had plastered walls, the stairwell and attic chambers had walls and ceilings covered with the same type of clapboards used on the exterior.

No evidence was found to indicate that the exterior or interior finishes were ever painted, and within a few years of its construction the walls and ceilings of the first-floor rooms had become blackened by soot and smoke from the fireplaces. With its low doors, small windows, and primitive interior, Laurel Branch presents a dismal picture of lower-middle-class life in Southern Maryland in the late 18th century.

Laurel Branch was dismantled in July and August of 1987, and stored at the National Colonial Farm for reconstruction as part of an interpretive exhibit.

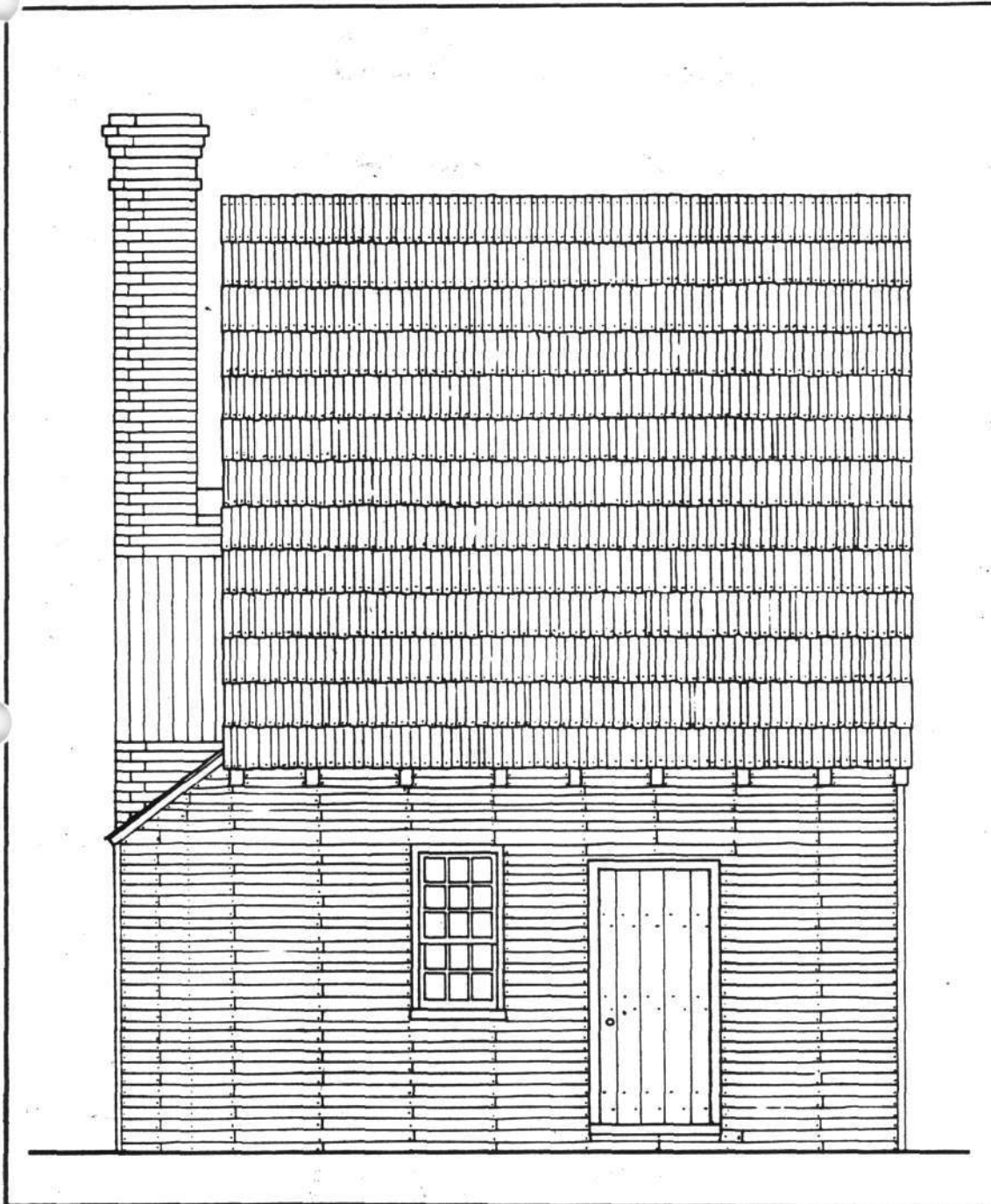
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CHAIN OF TITLE: LAUREL BRANCH, 18 CH 302

- 1671 "Lawrell Branch", a 1000 acre patent, granted to Daniel Jenifer (Maryland Hall of Records: Liber 14 folio 247).
- 1692 Daniel of St. Thomas Jenifer inherited 1000 acre land tract, known as Laurel Branch, from his father (Rivoire 1987).
- 1696 Daniel St. Thomas Jenifer sold "...all that tract and parcel of land called Lawrell Branch lying in Charles County.." to Colonel William Dent for 5000 lbs. of tobacco and 15 lbs of sterling (Chas. Co. Deeds:Liber Q, folio 85).
- 1705 Elizabeth Dent, youngest daughter of William Dent, inherited 500 acres, the southern half, of Laurel Branch (Chas. Co. Wills:Liber A#2, folio 240-248).
- 1753 Elizabeth (Dent) Tarvin sold 200 acres of Laurel Branch, eastern portion, to Richard Gamba, John Theobalds, and Joseph Semmes (Chas. Co. Deeds: Liber A#3, folio 108).
- 1757 Elizabeth (Dent) Tarvin sold 100 acres of Laurel Branch to Charles Neale (Chas. Co. Deeds: Liber G#3, folio 71).
- 1760 Elizabeth (Dent) Tarvin's will devises Laurel Branch, now a 200 acre parcel, to her three daughters, Rebecca, Elizabeth, and Ann (Chas. Co. Wills: Liber Ad#5, folio 171-172).
- 1768 The heirs of Elizabeth Tarvin were listed as paying taxes on the Laurel Branch property from 1761-1767. From 1768-1771, Elizabeth and Ann Tarvin paid the taxes (Maryland Hall of Records, Land Office Proprietary Debt Books 1761-1771).
- 1772 Basil Beale paid taxes for the Laurel Branch land from 1772-1775 (Maryland Hall of Records, Land Office Proprietary Debt Books 1772-1775).
- 1783 Basil Beale is listed as the owner of Laurel Branch (Maryland Hall of Records, 1783 Tax Assessment, District 4, Land: p.6).
- 1794 Ann Tarvin of Prince Georges County sold the 200 acres of Laurel Branch to Thomas Martin of Charles County (Chas. Co. Deeds: Liber Z#4, folio 321).

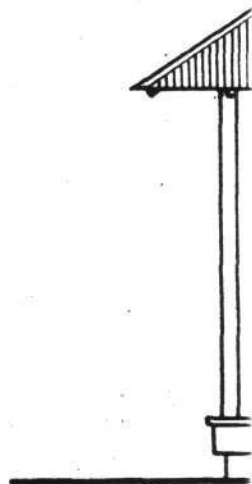
- 1816 Michael Martin inherits the Laurel Branch tract from his father Thomas (Chas. Co. Wills: HB#13, folio 499).
- 1844 Michael Martin died intestate so Laurel Branch is inherited by his four children. Thomas S. Martin, the eldest, buys out his siblings at a court appointed value of \$8 an acre (Chas. Co. Land Commission Records: Liber WM#1, folio 165).
- 1868 Benjamin M. Martin bought Laurel Branch from his parents, Thomas S. and Elizabeth Martin. The 200 acres was assigned to Caroline Jones, of Olive Hill, as security for the loan of \$1700 (Chas. Co. Deeds: Liber GAH#2, folio 284,285).
- 1874 Laurel Branch was transferred back to Thomas S. and Elizabeth Martin by Benjamin Martin (Chas. Co. Deeds: Liber GAH#4, folio 362).
- 1877 At the time of Thomas S. Martin's death in May, Caroline Jones still retained a mortgage on the Laurel Branch property (Chas. Co. Wills: Liber MT#18, folio 62). On July 24th Pliney Marin, as his father's executor, conveyed the 200 acre tract to Caroline Jones (Chas. Co. Deeds: Liber BGS#2, folio 72).
- 1885 Laurel Branch, "...the farm...lying on Mattawoman Swamp...", was bequeathed to Caroline Jones' sister Wahala's daughter, Mary Ardeesar, and to the three children of her brother Edward and the two children of her brother James (Chas. Co. Wills: Liber MT#18, folio 294).
- 1892 The "heirs of Caroline Jones" sold the 200 acres to Mary Virginia Taylor (Chas. Co. Deeds: Liber JST#4, folio 588).
- 1912 Mary V. Taylor and her husband Elisha sold the land "...commonly called Laurel Branch..." to Annie E. Willett (Chas. Co. Deeds: Liber HCC#24, folio 391).
- 1935 Annie E. Willett died intestate leaving an estate valued at \$1,920.75 (Chas. Co. Inventories: 1933-1937, folio 268).
- 1936 James Willett, widower, and other heirs of Annie E. Willett sold Laurel Branch to Alice Barsdales Chas. Co. Deeds: Liber WMA#62, folio 359).

- 1944 Alice Barsdales sold both the Laurel Branch and Olive Hill tracts to Stella Larsen and Mathilda Owen. Larsen then purchased Owen's share and became the sole owner (Chas. Co. Deeds: Liber 80, folio 229,231).
- 1956 James Philip purchased a 32 acre tract containing the Laurel Branch house (Chas. Co. Deeds: Liber 125, folio 304).
- 1987 The structure at 18 CH 302 has been donated by James Philip to the Accokeek Foundation, Inc. for use as an exhibit at the National Colonial Farm. At the same time, most of the surrounding land has been sold for a housing development to be called Philip's Meadow (Rivoire 1987, personal communication 1987).

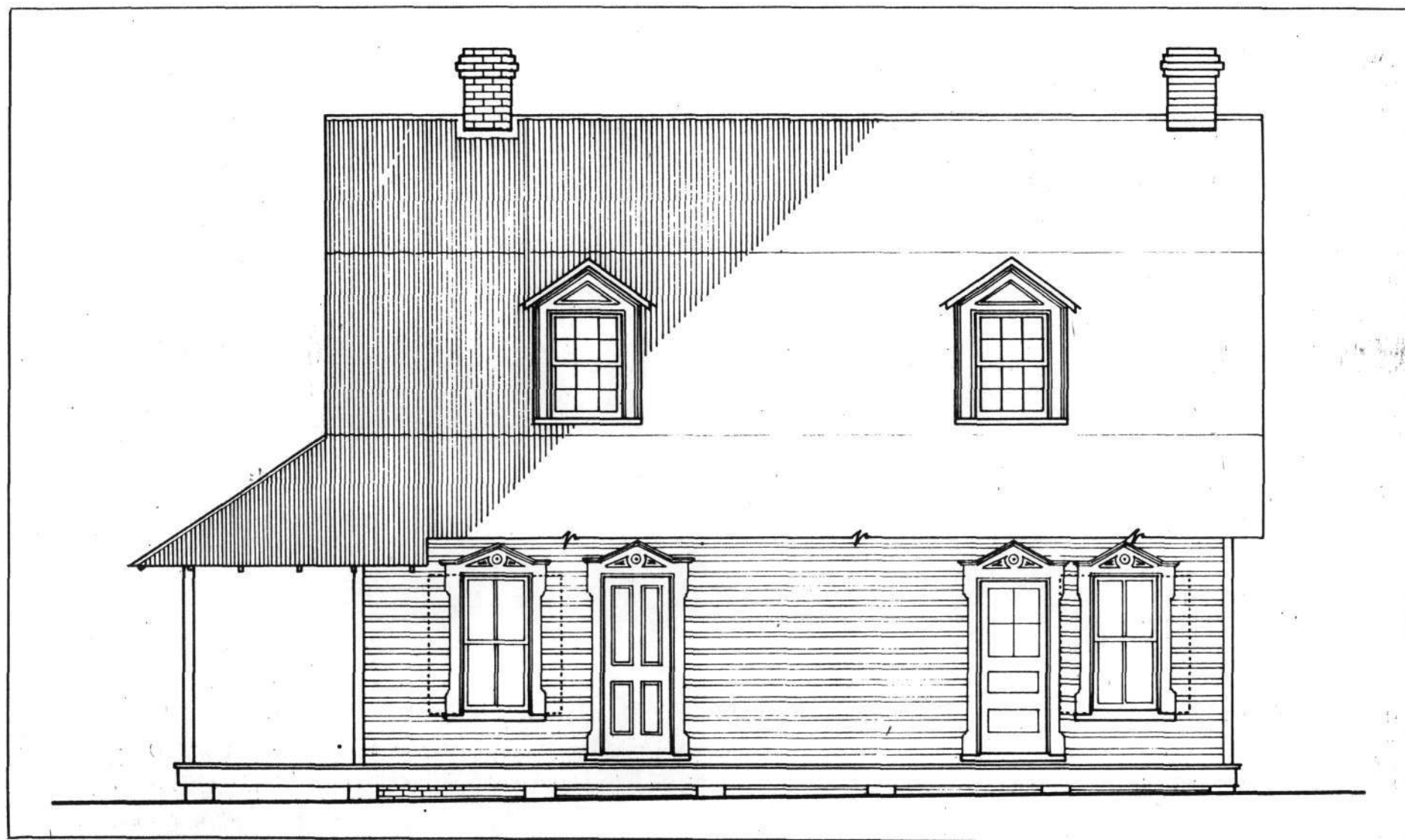


Front elevation of the original building as it appeared circa 1770. The roof and wall clapboards and exposed nail heads created their own distinct patterns. Structural deficiencies caused the house to dramatically lean inward within a decade or so following its construction. Had it not been for major repairs circa 1800, it surely would have collapsed.

Architectural deterioration by the around the first-floor



Laurel Branch: a difference



Drawings by J. Richard Rivoire

Architectural rendering of Laurel Branch as it appeared circa 1940. The building, vacant since about 1950, had suffered extensive exterior deterioration by the time it was acquired by the National Colonial Farm. The original house made up the left half of the building. The dashed lines around the first-floor windows indicate the location of earlier shutters.

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a different sort of architectural landmark

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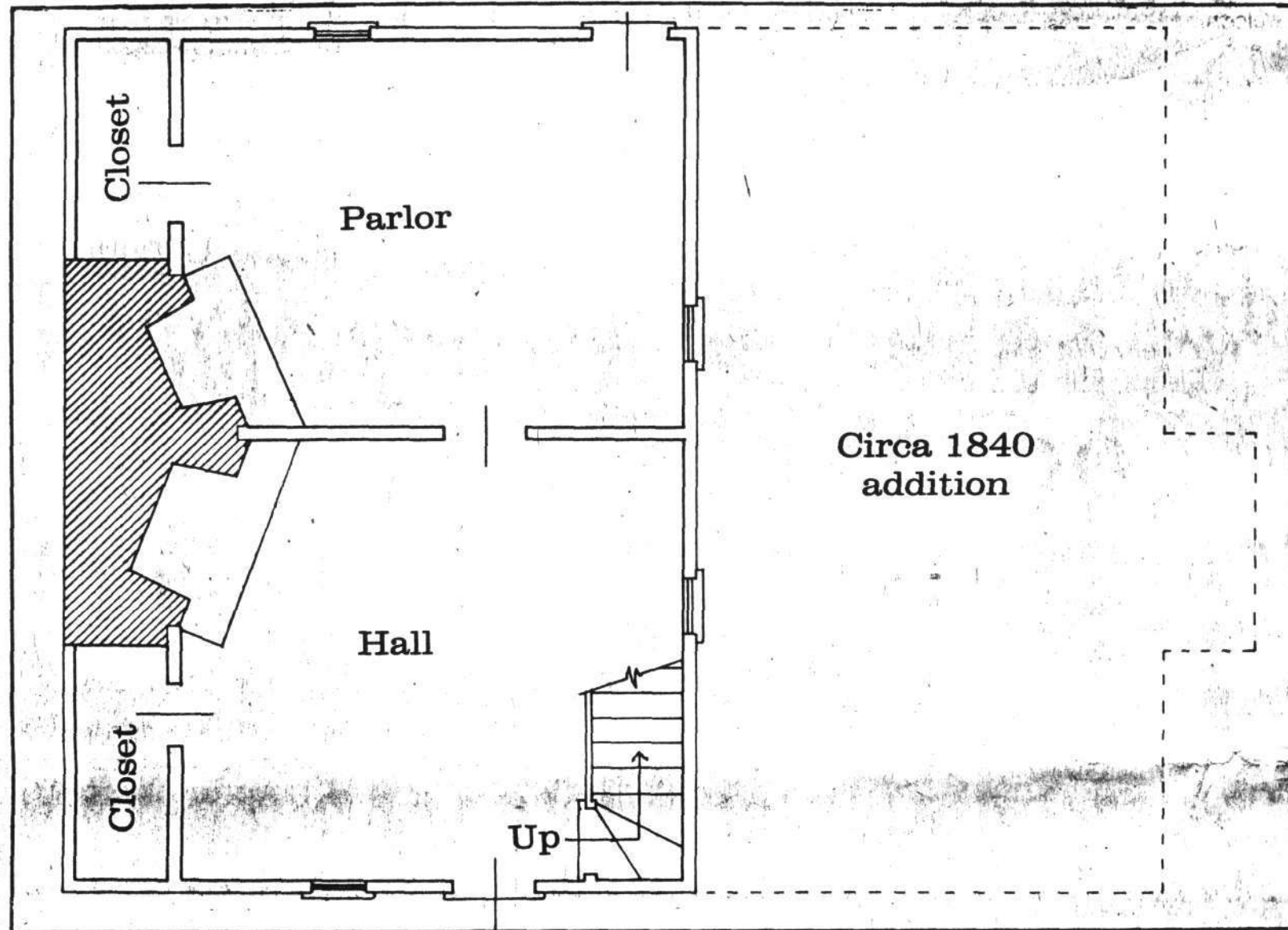
Tiny house

By J. Rich

It is safe to say that people perceive architectural building so important that you can't be pressed, regardless of how fully understood the concept.

In truth, the term "architectural landmark" is applied to a wide range of buildings. It could be a century Georgian building, a century tobacco store from the 18th century, depending on the text in which it is placed.

Many of our most remarkable structures are unmarked in our history and therefore overlooked. For example, those travelers between Billings and Hill roads might have noticed a weathered and abandoned house off the road, giving it much more character than it was.

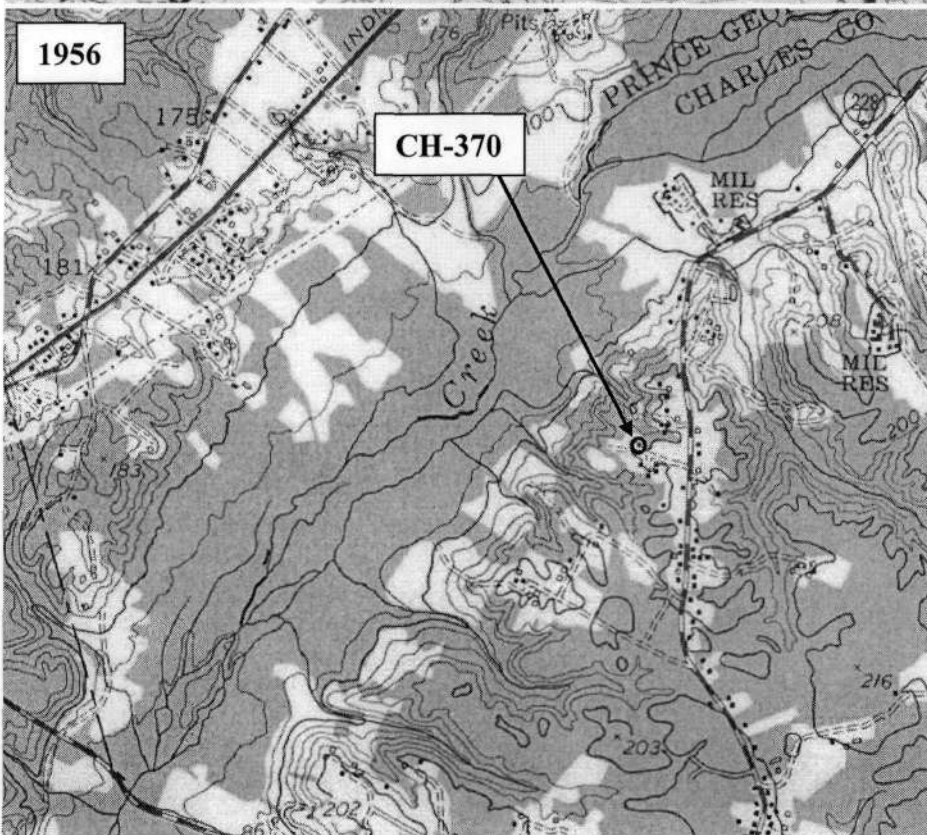
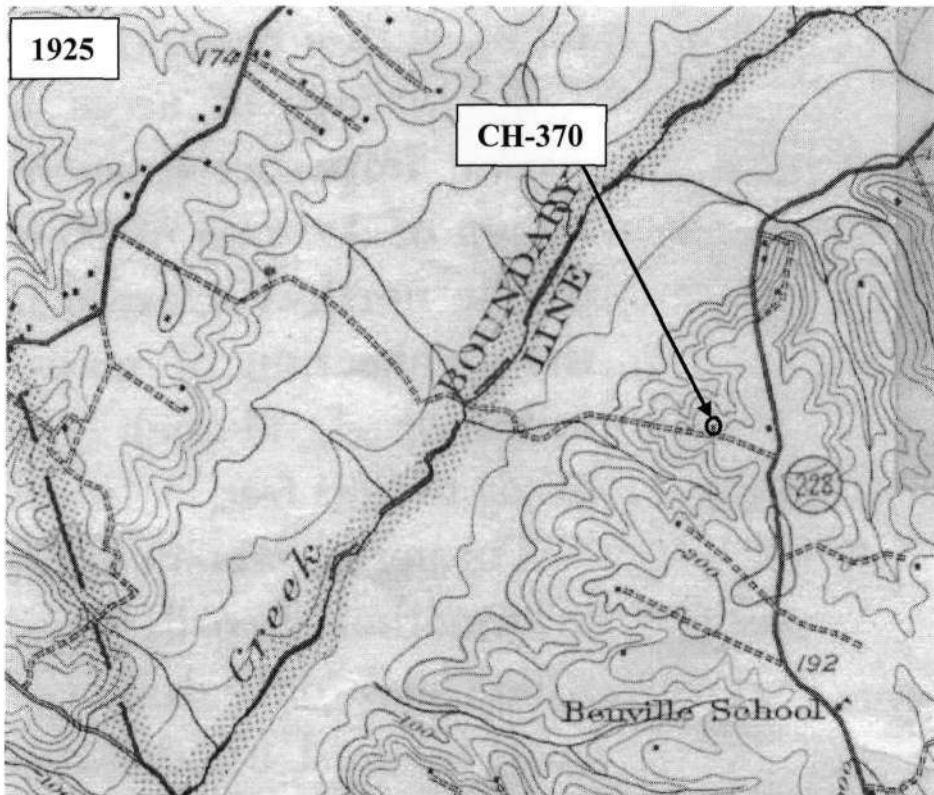


Restored first-floor plan of the circa 1770 house. The sheds and exterior chimney were removed around 1900. The principal part of the structure measured 16 feet wide by 27 feet deep.

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Laurel Branch, site
Indian Head 15' quadrangle



CH-370
Laurel Branch, site
Mount Vernon Quadrangle

